

Chapter V

Freedom, Desire and Woman: *Fida* and *The Swing of Desire*

Considering envy as the appropriate opposite of ‘egotist self love’, Slavoj Zizek argues that ‘The problem with human desire is ... as Lacan puts it, ... “desire of the Other” in all senses of that term: desire for the Other, desire to be desired by the Other, and especially desire for what the Other desires.’ (87). To him, the last form of desire i.e. the ‘desire for what the Other desires’ is what initiates envy but when all the three aspects of desire are understood with respect to women and theatre, they acquire nuanced social, political and aesthetic dimensions, because desire in these contexts can at once be ‘liberating’ and ‘incarcerating’, ‘subverting’ and ‘complying’, ‘experimental’ and ‘traditional’. Hence, the present chapter takes up *these* issues in relation to Indian women playwrights and directors and examines how their engagement with desire (personal or acquired), espouses the idea of freedom in multiple dimensions.

The claim for freedom (in the political sense of the term) through theatre in India has a history of its own, which dates back to the first production of *Nil-Darpan* in 1872, but conceived in terms of socio-sexual liberty for women, the history of modern Indian theatre does not go beyond the plays composed in the late 1970s. Some of the earlier plays like Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1963) or Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana* (1971) or *Nagamandala* (1988) took up themes of women’s desire but only to expose the narratives of socio-sexual frustration for women. With women playwrights and directors increasingly harping on the issues of women’s ‘freedom’ from the 1970s onwards, both the desire to be ‘free’ and the freedom to ‘desire’ gradually found their space in Indian theatre discourse. Mamta G. Sagar’s *The Swing of Desire* and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry’s *Fida* (both appear

in translations in Tutun Mukherjee's *Staging Resistance Plays by Women in Translation* (2005)), the two plays I take up for critical discussion in this chapter, are unique in presenting the contradictions inherent in the relation between desire and freedom when they are couched together against the backdrop of a patriarchal society. Directed by B. Jayashree in the 1990 National Theatre Festival, 'Expression', Sagar's *The Swing of Desire* is set in an urban household, where, two different forms of desires represented by Manasa and her sister-in-law, are caught in the cross fires of gender roles. On the other hand, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, who began as a theatre director by producing plays like Girish Karnad's *Nagamandalain* 1990 and her own, *Yerma* (1992), explored in *Fida*, facets of female desire where strong sexual passions are fraught with sense of guilt and fear of public criticism. In both the plays, the female sense of freedom, either in its socio-cultural or in its sexual form, is looked upon as the ultimate object of desire.

Mamta G. Sagar is a creative writer who has established herself as a poet, playwright, essayist and a translator (having translated contemporary African and Francophonic poems into Kannada). Though Sagar confessed that poetry has been her 'first choice for creative expressions' (Sagar Festival Internacional), the voice of the marginalized has always remained her forte: 'Through my poems I explore language, formulated by men, to express and signify meanings in a highly marginalized world which has always alienated women' (Sagar Festival). *The Swing of Desire* is an English translation of the Kannada play *Mayye Bhara Manave Bhara*, one of the four plays she has written. The play involves four main characters and a chorus of men aligned with the ancient Greek tradition. Manasa (the word may be literally translated from Sanskrit as 'the desire of the mind'), the wife of Pratap (the word can be moderately translated from Hindi as 'power'), appears to be struggling for an independent identity of her own, at the outset of the play. Manasa displays extreme

repugnance of the fact that she has been unjustly reduced to her husband's possession, and robbed of her own desire of becoming a professional dancer.

I married him, believing his words of love and loved him wholeheartedly too... But, in no time his love showed itself as a possessive demonic lust that completely destroyed me. How could I guess that it would turn out like this, that a corrosive lust would ruin my life? Right from the beginning he loved me like a madman. Not my talent, not my success, just my body....(Sagar 232)

Manasa's anguish clearly reveals her resistance against being denominated as an object of male desire. In love with 'just my (Manasa's) body' (232) (bracketing mine), Pratap epitomizes the typical chauvinist who tends to impose restrictions on the female body. The masculine lust in Pratap has never been devoid of the desire to control and subjugate. Pratap and Manasa's relationship delineates almost all the characteristics that Kathleen Gough finds crucial in socio-sexual inequality in the domestic sphere. She lists them as: 'men's ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them; to command or exploit their labor to control their produce; to control or rob them of their children; to confine them physically and prevent their movement; to use them as objects in male transactions; to cramp their creativeness; or to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments.' (Gough 69-70) Pratap's endeavor to domesticate Manasa and stop her from pursuing a career in dancing, appears to be an attempt to control her 'sovereign will' which Polly Young-Eisendrath considers to be 'what a woman desires above all else' (25). The very act of controlling is associated with both recognition and subjugation of the other. The 'female' is feared to be the one which has the innate potential to defy the established norms of patriarchy, and hence the desperation to be 'in charge' of the feminine desire. Conventional gender roles tend to maneuver the female desires in ways which the patriarchal motives are achieved and sustained. Women are expected to generate desires which have possibilities

only within the admissible domestic space. To Manasa, loss of a career of her choice is synonymous to the loss of her 'real self':

I am Manasa ... How do I write these unwanted lines? The very thought irks me! *Chhi!* Disgusting memories ... The age between twenty and thirty is a precious time for a woman when she is not bothered by sneaking strands of grey. Nor is there any care for the world; no haunting thoughts of death. If one wished to do something in life, one should do it then – or never. ... Such a precious times, so many priceless moments ... but for me all gone ... all lost because of a selfish man! How do I write all this? What shall I write? - Was it a mistake to have married Pratap? Was I the only one there to quench his lust? Couldn't he find anyone else?' (232).

Though Manasa's passionate tirade is subject to the conditions of her own life, it is evocative for women of the age-group of twenties in general too. Leslie C. Bell, who interviews a number of women from the age group of twenty to thirty, in her book, *Hard to Get: 20-Somethings Women and the Paradox of Sexual Freedom*, however, argues that the sexual freedom acquired through constant socio-cultural struggles, is more often wasted than guided towards fruition.

'new in-between period of early adulthood for twenty-somethings ... offers women a mixed bag: opportunities, to be sure, but also retrograde messages about their identities as sexual beings, partners, and future mothers. And while they have plenty of training in how to be successful and in control of their careers, young women have little help or training, apart from the self-help aisle in their local bookstore, in how to manage these freedoms, mixed messages, and their own desires to get what they want from sex and love... The absence of such useful training combined with the new freedoms and mixed messages that characterize their twenties, contribute to a paradox

of sexual freedom. Young women may appear to have more choices than ever before, but the opening up of cultural notions of what is acceptable for women generates great confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety'(ch.1).

Bell's point here is that freedom is never practiced as assumed by women and in the new age of 'liberating twenties'. This, she argues, is mainly due to feminisms' failure in providing appropriate 'definitions' and 'trainings' to enjoy the 'acquired' sexual freedom. Manasa, whose twenties, she feels, has been wasted in marrying and mothering is caught in the similar wilderness as the young, working and childless women whom Leslie interviewed.

Embodying the 'feminine' in a heterosexual social framework, Manasa has failed to assert her sexual/ political freedom. What ensues, therefore, is Manasa's rebellion against the patriarchal codes of sexual domination. She alleges, that Pratap has turned her into a 'child-bearing machine, an object of your (his) wanton desires' (Sagar233):

'How dare you use me and exploit my maternal instincts to serve your selfish motives? Whenever I think of it, I feel like strangling each one of my children. Chhi! ... But why should I punish them for your sins? You are the one who must be punished.' (233)

Manasa is therefore subject to masculine desire and control by the traditional emotional pronouncements of motherhood. One is inevitably led to question the social institutions of care and sacrifices built around the idea of motherhood. Pratap, however, uses them as patriarchal strategies to not only invade and exploit Manasa's personal spaces, but also questions her credibility as a woman and a mother:

What is your identity, your self-respect? Your pride as a great dancer? Without caring a damn about others? Is that what she makes you forget the love – starved children of

yours, deafening you with the applause? How inhuman can you be? Tell me, what kind of a woman are you, what kind of a mother? (233)

Limiting the physical movement of women within the framework of motherhood has a history of its own. It has been instrumental in controlling and imposing the presumptions of femininity on women. Enforcing moral, social, physical and domestic hindrances on women have historically cramped their 'creativity' and suppress their professional desires. While the frustration of desire for a successful profession may amount to the suppression of sovereign will, 'desire', in itself, is generative of multi-dimensional forms and complexities.

One of the traditional approaches to desire (male/ female) has been that it is reproductive of suffering. In the Buddhist scheme of things, it is 'desire' which is the primary source of all misery in the world, and, is best destroyed, if one is seeking *nirvana* (liberation). However, branding 'Desire' as a force that produces misery, requires considering it as alien to the physical nature of existence which tends to embody what it desires. In another approach, desire may be looked upon as fundamental to life and existence; viz. it is the desire of having children that bring forth the offspring, and it is the un-acknowledged desire of death that actively draws one towards his end. Hence it would be an anomaly to allege desire as the root cause of misery. Rather, it may be inferred that one of the primary cause of misery is *unfulfilled* desire. *Fulfilled* desire often results in unbridled joy. This also leads to the fact that one's desire can be relative and reflective of the social, cultural, political and sexual conditions s(he) is living in. Consequently, a man who is indoctrinated in the philosophy of killing desire, may be left with one great desire of destroying desire. Hence, desire emerges as one of the unavoidable rudiments of life. Mamta G. Sagar and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, therefore, take up the interplay of different forms of 'desire', placed in extremely different yet similarly complex contexts of the Indian socio-political milieu.

In *Kamasutra* (Aphorisms of Love), Vatsyayan attests to the view that *kama* (desire) along with *artha* (profit or resource) and *dharma* (virtuosity) are to be performed with respect to their relative importance in life. He explains: 'Any action which conduces to the practice of Dharma, Artha and Kama together, or of any two, or even one of them, should be performed, but an action which conduces to the practice of one of them at the expense of the remaining two should not be performed' (Vatsyayana 25). Hence, desire has definitely been part of the discourse in Indian aesthetics. *Kama* is regarded as one of the four healthy goals of *purusharthas*. *Kama* is generally defined as sexual desire but the concept broadly refers to any desire/ passion/ aesthetic enjoyment of life that may or may not involve sexual connotation. Indian theatre has explored both the sexual and asexual aspects of *kama* with respect to women. One can find immediate reference in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*. Though different in their contexts, both the plays deal with women's desires (*kamana*). While *Hayavadana* harps on the complex game of intellectual desire on the one and sexual desire on the other, *Nagamandala* is thematically poised on a woman's passionate longing for carnal and emotional union with her husband. Padmini in *Hayavadana* is caught in the dilemma of her own desires of possessing the combination of her husband's intellectual prowess and Kapila's (husband's friend) physical features but Rani in *Nagamandala* displays such passion for a successful conjugality with her husband that an *ichhadharinaga* (self-willed snake) is drawn towards disguising himself as the husband. Though Karnad successfully projects subtle layers of women's desires, he chooses domestic frameworks for both the plays. Tripurari Sharma, however, brought woman's desire out of the domestic space and placed it in the context of national struggle in *Azizun Nisa: A Tale from the Year 1857*. In an interview given to me at the National School of Drama, Delhi, she confided that she has conceived Azizun Nisa's character as the one for whom more than the motive for her country it was the sense of freedom that she experienced in partaking a role outside the usual

confines of her life as a courtesan. Hence, multiple aspects of women's desire have gradually found its place in the post-Independence Indian theatre.

But when it comes to incestuous sexual desire, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's *Fida* emerges as a unique reference. In her introduction to the play that appears in *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*, Tutun Mukherjee observes that '*Fida*, inspired by Euripedes' *Hippolytus* and Racine's *Phaedre*, contains within it echoes of the Punjabi folktale of Luna. But Neelam's *Fida* is not a wanton woman like Luna or Euripedes' *Phaedra*; neither is she a victim of destiny like Racine's protagonist. Trapped by her own passion, she is rather like Abbie Putnam in O' Neill's *Desire under the Elms.*' (364). Though the play is a saga of irresistible passion, branding *Fida* as a woman 'trapped by her passion' (364) may appear a misnomer when understood at the backdrop of the absent presence of the socio-cultural and political framework. Chowdhry projects the character of *Fida* not in terms of an isolated woman who is caught in her personal cocoon of lust and desire but one who is constantly apprehensive of the turns her desires for Harsan, her step-son would take. While confiding her 'terrible lust for love' (Chowdhry, 409), *Fida* betrays the predicament she fears for her own desires:

When I tell you about my fate, my sins, the shameful story of my life, believe me, my name will be more besmirched than before. (408)

With Bebo acting as a constant alter ego, *Fida* is always in a hiatus between her desires as the mother of her son and the desire to be desired by Harsan. The desires as the mother of her own son has obvious social and cultural indoctrinations associated with it. One of the predominant images of women in the male canon has always been that of the mother (or comforter). It is the figure of the mother which has been traditionally raised as the epitome of sacrifice and the custodian of her child's rights (sometimes even at the cost of her own).

However, looked from the convex side, the mother often emerges as the willing subject of sacrifice for her children. It is through this sanctioned patriarchal matrix of domination, women as mothers abandon their personal desires. In scene ii of the play, it is reported that the king was missing after the battle and that in his absence the throne can be claimed by three – Fida's son, Harsan (the king's son from his first wife) and Asavari (the rightful heir who was denied her ancestral property). Fida is caught between her passionate desires for Harsan and prescribed motherly 'duties' towards her son. Bebo desperately tries to dissuade Fida from her apparent sexual frustration in not being able to express her desire for Harsan. It is only motherly duty that deters her.

Bebo: ... Your son needs you. If you live, he may be the king. As an orphan, who will care for him? He will be a servant to your rival's son. When he complains to the heavens, the gods will be angry with you and your ancestors will curse you. Don't you think you have reason now to live? ...

Fida: Yes, you're right. If my motherhood stops me from death, I shall certainly live. (411).

While the motherhood 'trap' can prove 'evasive' for women, Manasa in *The Swing of Desire*, uses it as an effective instrument of constant torment for Pratap. She turns against him the 'ancient' masculine desires of having children and controlling woman's sexuality. While Pratap initially succeeds in *enforcing* motherhood on Manasa, she uses her children as pawns in her 'sex-battle' against him. She informs Pratap that one of her children is not from him and that he will never know who that child is. Manasa, therefore, simply subverts the 'game' she was subject to. Pratap later brands Manasa's pursuit of a career in dancing as 'prostitution' and blames her for staking his family name. Such branding, however, is reflective of the masculine frustration in failing to thwart women's movement outside the domestic pitch. But

Manasa refuses to be subject to such patriarchal tirades and instead forces Pratap into an endless anxiety of losing his *control* over both her and her children. Pratap feels deceived and betrayed. The play however is unique in evincing that in the ‘sacred’ traditions of hetero-normative marriages, branding women as prostitutes, may appear extremely vilifying, but at times, it may seem annihilating for men too.

PRATAP: (*Angrily*) You ... what you've done is called prostitution. Do you know that?

...

PRATAP: I am not ready to forsake my honour and that of my family by making a public exhibition of my private life.

MANASA: And I am not ready to strangle my dreams!

...

PRATAP: Will you stop your harangue! Are these words of a loving mother?

MANASA: Oh you can be sarcastic and flaunt the motherhood tag at me!

PRATAP: Who? Who is that man? Tell me, which one of my children is that bundle of sin?

(*He clutches her hand and swings her back.*) Will you tell me or not?

MANASA: (*With anger and pain*) I won't say ... I won't. Whatever you do, I won't! Who is that child, who is its father, you'll never know. I will never tell you that.

PRATAP: (*Releasing her*) Oh God! What a farce! (*Sinks down.*)

MANASA: (*After a pause*) You know, I understood your plan to keep me tied down with child-bearing when I spoke to your sister. Then, I was in a more pathetic state than you are today. (Sagar 235)

While Manasa appears unpretentious in subjecting Pratap to a psychological ‘turmoil’ strong enough to pull down his male ego, she recognizes herself with the age old tradition of the

'hag bitch'. It is often expected of a woman that she must disguise her desires under the cloak of 'niceties and seductions' (Young-Eisendrath 15) but Manasa rejects the 'eggshell quality of female desire'(15) and clearly makes herself heard. That she is prepared to go the extreme for her career on the one hand and be famous on the other, harbors her earnest desire to be free. She betrays the secret desire to be 'wanted', but, this is not what is traditionally associated with the desire of becoming the beautiful muse. She lulls the desire to be the crowd's favourite, needless to mention, that the crowd is predominantly 'masculine'. In Scene IV of the play, a man from the audience comments,

She is a very good dancer! And, she is so beautiful! Like sparkling gold, like a flawless pearl! Like, she was born to be admired! How could she have given up all this for a husband! Really, I can't imagine. I think I have fulfilled my life's desire by watching her dance. (Sagar 245)

Manasa is overjoyed: 'Aah! What sweet words! These are the words that I have craved for, while I was with Pratap'.(245) Polly Young-Eisendrath would call her 'responsible' to her own desires because according to her, 'Being responsible means trying again and again in different ways to say what you want, until it can be heard and understood.'(30) The want to be wanted by the crowd rejects the notion of being subject to only the husband's desire. Manasa covertly emerges as the subject of her own desires. She is the desiring subject that resists being transformed into Pratap's 'desirable'. But, if looked upon as a 'hag', she is expected to display 'endless, voracious, consuming' (25) desires, reinforcing the 'misogynist belief that a demanding woman is to be dreaded and subdued' (14).

A threat to the male dominance, therefore, a 'hag' is better tamed. Pratap warns Manasa of getting into 'great trouble' (Sagar 236) if she doesn't tell him about the child. His strategy of generating fear and anxiety in Manasa is resultant of his 'masculine' frustration. Displaying a

tender scene between the child and Manasa where she is willingly made to participate in her son's demand to be told a bed-time story, Mamta Sagar suggests the actors of the story to dress up in the Yakshagana or Chhau style. Blending the modern proscenium with folk theatre forms, Sagar mentions the old legend of 'Darling girl of Muttur' in order to suggest that women desire sovereign will over material pleasure. The king in the story offers the Muttur girl, 'jewels', 'silk' and 'palace' (237), but she rejects everything. Displaying his 'majestic' chauvinism, he imprisons her: 'If that is so, then you should sing only for me. You should sing only in my palace.'(237).The Muttur girl gave up singing and again sang only when the Lord of the Wind played the flute. 'The girl showed the world that her song was not for the king. But that made the king angry and he left his kingdom feeling humiliated'. (238).While Sagar uses the bed-time song to compliment the thematic movement of the play, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry uses an introductory song at the beginning in order to provide the audience a peep inside the scheme of things, and a concluding song at the end of the play in order to leave them with an insight into the repentance of a guilt ridden mind. Neelam's first song is a dramaturgic installation which suggests the continuance of trouble in Fida because of a non-extinguished 'desire'. The last song on the contrary, is a commentary on the consequences of the *same* 'desire'. Neelam is unpretentious in putting forward traces of sexual desire in the very first song. She uses subtle 'elemental' images at the very outset and later profusely carries them throughout the play. Chowdhry interplays 'river', 'thorns', 'yearning' and 'season' in the song to covertly suggests the maze of desire Fida is struggling with.

Desire and the flow of river are often closely associated in the indigenous *fakiri* traditions as well. The female body, symbolically harbours three 'rivers' of desire, viz., *Ira*, *Pinagala*, *Sushumna*, geographically (and cosmically) substituted as the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati. The *Ira* representing the tide and *Pingala*, the ebb of desire, blends with *Sushmana*, the

bodily sap (*deha-rasa*). It is the *purusa*(the masculine energy) which has the potential and can be trained to drag the *Ira* down and push *Pingal* back along with *Sushumnain* order to use desire creatively. For Fida, however, desire remains parched forever. Both the masculine capacity and the feminine tide and ebb may change with the change of 'seasons'. But Fida is subject to ceaseless frustration in the absence of any 'masculine' desire for her in Harsan. Fida's 'cup of life' (408) has run 'dry' (406) in the lack of any passionate flow of desire, referred to as 'river' throughout the play. Even in the concluding song of the play, 'river' is alluded to in the phrase, the 'damp river bed' (426) but symbolizing the 'death' of all passions and emotions. Though thematically hinged with the events in the play, the songs may also stand on their own rights. However, if Neelam's use of songs be seen as a dramatic innovation, Mamta Sagar's use of public comments on Manasa's dance performances and her relationship with Pratap, echoes the ancient Greek technique of using anonymous 'chorus' as commentary. In the *Swing of Desire*, her chorus does not participate directly in the main action of the play but both Pratap and Manasa are hugely affected by their comments. As the chorus of common men, named merely as A, B and C, converse amongst each other, both Pratap and Manasa are shown overhearing them. Sagar makes the chorus represent multiple perspectives that reflects the socio-patriarchal framework of thought. They begin by talking about Manasa's dance but soon identify her more as a woman than an artist. She is scrutinised as a woman 'who left her husband and had an affair with another man' (Sagar 244). With his own thought resonating among the chorus, Pratap is quick to respond, 'Yes, she is the same Manasa' (244). But indoctrinated in patriarchal morality, Pratap is also not ready to accept that he has been abandoned by his wife, 'A woman should always be good and honest to have a happy family life. She didn't leave her husband, her husband left her.' (244). When the chorus talks about professional 'success', they initially support Manasa's claims: 'Who wouldn't feel frustrated if such a talent had to be sacrificed for the sake of child-bearing?'

(244). They make fun of Pratap but soon turn sympathetic towards him. The age old myth that a working woman can never take care of her family and children, resounds in them. It is Manasa who is now blamed for 'failing' to be the home-maker and the mother she is expected to be. Manasa protests vehemently:

C: How many children does she have?

B: Had she time for that? Her poor husband loved children, it seems. Heard that he has started an orphanage.

MANASA: No! No! This can't be true! My children! My dear little babies. Not that I had fervently wished that they be born yet they are my children, after all. My lovely little darlings...

A: Family, wife and children, how nice! (245)

Sagar is therefore careful in presenting the debate between a woman's frustration and society's attempts to deride woman's desires. Manasa's passionate response to and rejection of the socially immanent patriarchal desire to 'arrest' a woman within her family, is also a proclamation of her love for freedom and self-will. She asserts that it is the fulfillment of desire, not sacrifice which leads a woman to her liberation.

MANASA: He wasn't like you describe him. Yes, he has left me – forever, I suppose! But he deceived me. I feel the rage of that betrayal and the suffering. But he hasn't escaped the consequences either. He is still tortured for deceiving me. Even though he declares that he left me, that one arrow I shot hasn't let him rest in peace, and never will, I know that! No matter what a man does, society is ready to support and defend him. But for a woman, the smallest mistakes become monstrous. She is insulted and thrown out of the society. She belongs nowhere, has nowhere to go, no place to live.

(Manasa moves to the chair and sits down as if preparing to write)

Now I am back to what I love most – my dancing. I dance to forget the bitter moments of my life. I dance because I wish to. (246)

Though dancing, as she wishes to, is 'liberating' for Manasa, Sagar displays the 'swing' of desire through a completely contrasting image of woman in Manasa's sister-in-law.

Throughout the play, Pratap's sister, who is also the wife of Bhava, remains anonymous and is just referred to as the Sister. Her anonymity probably suggests her voiceless existence. That patriarchy enforces itself on heterosexual marriage and is capable of generating multiple strategies in order to execute chauvinist domination on woman is what is substantiated by the Bhava-Sister relationship. If Pratap displays patriarchy's desire to enslave women's attempts towards socio-sexual liberation, Bhava demonstrates the patriarchal annoyance at women's successful mimicking of the 'prescribed' gender roles. While Manasa is blamed of failing as a homemaker, Sagar presents the Sister as a woman who has suppressed all her desires for her family and is desperate to enjoy her husband's love. In a dialogue between Bhava and the Sister, the former clears that he is annoyed with his conjugal relation because of the Sister's extreme ignorance in worldly affairs. The Sister's desperate attempts to hinge on to her relation with Bhava are not just rejected but also held responsible for the ensuing separation between the two. To the Sister, satisfying man's sexual appetite seemed enough for a happy marriage, but Bhava is inconspicuous in confiding that man's desires are not just associated with the body but also with the brains. Hence, it is patriarchy's insatiable desire to subjugate women in every possible term. But important is to recognize the tendency towards self-annihilation to uphold her socially recognized identity in a hetero-normative conjugal relation.

SISTER: As if it's easy to break bonds ... look, I won't ask what you do outside. But, at home, with me, can't we be happy? Look here, we shouldn't part like this.

BHAVA: Do you think I am computer? That I'd store all those feelings you want to feed into me? (After a pause) It's not enough, you see, that a woman satisfies one in bed. She should satisfy man's intellectual needs as well. So, there's no point. How will you ... you wouldn't understand at all.

SISTER: Why not? I understand everything. I may not rise up to your intellectual standards. But, I ... I love you so much!

(She covers her face to stop herself from crying and sinks into a chair nearby.)

BHAVA: *(Speaking to himself)* There's such a difference between innocence and ignorance. I appreciate your innocence, but your ignorance irritates me. You have suppressed yourself so much that I can't see you as my companion at all. (239)

What can be inferred from this argument is that patriarchy desires to subordinate women in every possible way. If restricting women's movements in the public, controlling their sexuality and objectifying are some of the patriarchal strategies of subordinating women to the masculine desires, those women who orient themselves according to the patriarchal institutions, are further pushed towards male 'ignorance'. The swing in *The Swing of Desire* therefore suggests the swing of patriarchal desire from 'controlling' to 'ignoring' and 'abasing' and not merely the swing of women's desire from being 'wanting to be wanted by one' to being 'wanting to be wanted by all'.

If the 'sister' in *The Swing of Desire* represents the desire to be desirable, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's Fida appears to be her mirror reflection. Exploring desirability, according to Polly Young-Eisendrath, is 'to encounter a hidden underworld of female sexual

shame, embarrassment, confusion, frustration, and numbness'(57). Fida's desire to be desired by her step-son is drawn in a similar light. She is confused, ashamed, embarrassed and numbed:

FIDA: ... Where do my thoughts wander? God has numbed my senses. I'm ashamed of myself... wish I could hide in the darkness... why are my sinful thoughts being revealed to the world? I can't stop my eyes from filling with tears of pain. What shall I do? (Chowdhry 407)

One wonders what makes Fida apprehensive. The sexual desire to possess a man is not what stalls her routine, but it is the sense of amorality and guilt in her desire that unmakes her. Employing Bebo as a social mirror who has access to the inner recesses of Fida's mind, Neelam keeps the social and moral context constantly alive for Fida.

BEBO: ... Look here, have you any right to forsake the life that is a gift of God? You're also betraying your children and him who married you. When your children lose their mother, they too will wander in the shadow of death. And what will happen to your son's dream of wearing the crown one day. The crown will surely go to the older queen's heir, the warrior queen's son Harsan. (407)

Bebo is quick to recognize that Fida's vulnerability goes against the traditional 'grain' of women and therefore reminds her of her role as a mother. She is 'expected' to control her sexual desires. Polly Young-Eisendrath argues that 'The nineteenth and twentieth century sexual ideology claimed that women were better equipped than men to bring their sexual impulses and desires under control because women are natural caregivers in being mothers'(62). But Fida's desire has an element of uncontrollability in it which makes her susceptible to the socio-patriarchal forces of containment. Young-Eisendrath observes, 'By the middle and end of the nineteenth century, doctors and scientists widely counseled that rampant sexual desire in a woman could lead her to hysteria, criminal acts, and violence' (62). Throughout the play, Fida exemplifies the observation. Fida is a desiring woman, whose

desire to be loved must be satiated. In an extremely passionate conversation, she reveals that her first encounter with Harsan reduced her to her 'elements'. In her attempts to suppress her sexual desires for Harsan, she gets him banished. She gains momentary freedom from her desires in her husband's love but is again 'enslaved' when Harsan returns and the King goes out for war. She realizes that there is no escape from this passion for it is strong enough to be tamed by the moral social commandments. But Fida's anguish lies less in her desires than in the sense of guilt her desires have produced. Quoting Fida at length gives access to the complex nuances of her mind expressed through Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's use of typical organic symbols.

Listen now to my only request: don't advise or scold –
There's no point in correcting one close to death.
Don't waste your breath to put out the fire that rages in my breast.
There is no sense in guiding the wind and the water
The fire will burn itself out –
The trembling wind will fall –
The rising water will calm –
Let me take the course that I must. (410)

Chowdhry's use of 'water', 'fire' and 'wind' images suggest the irresistibility of Fida's passions but the saturating sense of guilt and incest advocates that she is not free from the moral educations that shape a woman's desire in society. A psychosexual appraisal of Fida's guilt and shame would reveal that she is caught in the tension between the impulses of her body and a socially indoctrinated mind. Her overwhelming desire to possess Harsan refuses being tamed by the principles of 'ideal' Indian wife but at the same time, the absence of Fida's husband does not free her from the socio-cultural aphorisms. She nonetheless fails to display the 'customary' behaviours of a wife whose husband is absent from the household as they are

mentioned in Vatsyayan's *Kamasutra*. The 1st Chapter of the 4th *khand*(part) of *Kamasutra* is 'On the Manner of Living of a Virtuous Woman, And of Her Behaviour during the Absence of Her Husband'. The virtuous woman for Vatsyayana is the one 'who has affection for her husband, should act in conformity with his wishes as if were a divine being, and with his consent should take upon herself the whole care of his family'(128). An elaborate list of do's and don'ts for the virtuous woman follow that touch almost every aspect of domestic life. Speaking on behaviour of the virtuous during her husband's absence from the house, Vatsyayna sermonizes,

She should wear only her auspicious ornaments, and observe the fasts in honour of the Gods. While anxious to hear the news of her husband, she should still look after her household affairs. ... She should look after and keep in repair the things that are liked by her husband, and continue the works that have been begun by him.... The fasts and feasts should be observed with the consent of the elders of the house. The resources should be increased by making purchases and sales according to the practice of the merchants and by means of honest servants, superintended by herself. The income should be increased and expenditure diminished as much possible. And when her husband returns from his journey, she should receive him at first in her ordinary clothes, so that he may know in what way she has lived during his absence, and should bring to him some presents, as also materials for the worship of the Deity. ... The wife, whether she be a woman of noble family, or a virgin widow remarried, or a concubine, should lead a chaste life, devoted to her husband, and doing everything for his welfare. Women acting thus acquire Dharma, Artha and Kama, obtain a high position, and generally keep their husbands devoted to them. (132 – 133).

Throughout the play, Fida shows overwhelming desire berating her from playing the ideal house wife. She fails to manage both her household as well as the kingdom. The public

supports Harsan's claim to the throne and Harsan himself is ready to give major sections of the kingdom to Asavari and the son of Fida. Neelam constructs the drama as a triangle of desire, where both Fida and Asavari 'loves' and desires Harsan. Both feel that their desires remain un-satiated due to Harsan's ignorance. Both of them wish to emerge as the 'beautiful muse' for him. In wanting to be wanted, both wish to be the object of Harsan's desire. But the 'beautiful muse' has problems of her own. It always runs the risk of either being made subject to socio-patriarchal standards of morality or being frustrated by the masculine ignorance.

Fida: I'm mad, yes, but didn't know what lay in fate

Harsan, don't think that I call myself guiltless

I'm aware of my sorrow and sinfulness –

My shame, my guilt and my repentance.

I'm like fire, burning all – myself almost of all.(Chowdhry 416)

Unrequited in her desire for Harsan, Fida is caught between 'shame', 'guilt', and 'repentance' because of her secret desire to be the ideal woman/ wife/ mother. She longs for freedom from the social indoctrinations but she is compelled by her role as a mother and a queen. Hence it is the double bind of desires that shoves her to 'hysteria, criminal acts, and violence' (Young-Eisendrath 62). In the presence of the king, she drives Harsan into banishment, subjects him to physical torture and throws him into prison. But in the absence of her husband, who represents the physical embodiment of socio-cultural manacles for Fida, her sexual desires for Harsan surfaces and she is driven into submitting them before her passions. Though rejected, Fida continues fanning her desires for Harsan and tries different methods to win his consent. When Bebo informs that Harsan is a misogynist, Fida assumes the general masculine hunger for wealth and power as his vulnerabilities. She asks Bebo to lure Harsan with the gifts of 'golden crown' and her own share of the kingdom in return of his love. However, when her husband returns, Fida is quick to blame Harsan, who is later killed on the charge of

fostering incestuous desire for his step mother. Unlike Fida, Asavari is non-manipulative and unpretentious in her desire for Harsan. Harsan too reciprocates his love for Asavari. But pertinent is to see that, unlike Mamta G. Sagar who portrays extremely different contexts with respect to Manasa and her sister-in-law in *The Swing of Desire*, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry draws Asavari's character with the same brush as that of Fida but achieves the expected difference in their own swings of desires. Asavari, like Fida, is willing to sacrifice any political or material benefits in order to be the subject of Harsan's desires. When Asavari learns from Asma that Harsan seemed enamoured by her beauty, she unpretentiously ventilates the joy of her 'requited' desire:

ASAVARI: Oh tell me again, my friend, tell me all.

That he'll come to me smiling, I cannot believe

That he will year for me, I cannot hope

No hope but my desire seeks that my hard – hearted lover

shall meet. (412)

After being anointed heir to the king's throne, Harsan confides, he has been 'bewitched' by Asavari's beauty which makes the latter feel melodramatically liberated from the torment she has been subjected to. Harsan's gift of political rights to Asavari is accepted by her but at the same time she reveals that it is not the power over the land that she desires but his love.

ASAVARI: ... O Prince, I accept gratefully all your gifts. The Kingdom you want to give me may be great but it isn't the object I desire. It is something nearer to me that I seek...!(414)

In playing the 'beautiful muse' Asavari's desire to be wanted by Harsan is neither burdened with the psycho-social notions of incest nor is she propelled towards 'criminal acts', even though, the political hindrance in being from the 'enemy' camp still remains. Blending the 'naqqal' traditions of Punjab with the trained modern actors in her productions of the play,

Neelam acquires a subtle distance between the actor and the character. The dramaturgic shift in the costume, gesture, speech and disposition from Fida to Asavari also shifts the audience's response towards the two otherwise similar characters. Both wish to be the 'beautiful muse', but, the 'excess' that features Fida both in her temperament and in her desires, forces the traditional belief that 'female power is unhealthy and overwhelming – a kind of soul sucking danger that needs to be warded off by women and men alike. So we can consciously support the male fantasy that the only legitimate power to be encouraged in girls and women, is, to be the Object of Desire.'(Young-Eisendrath 19). Hence, in desiring the excess (incestuous), Fida swings from the 'beautiful muse' to the 'hag bitch', while Asavari who is not 'too demanding, pushy, bossy... rush away from the hag-bitch... move towards the muse and her false power as the object of Desire. Although she appears to promise that female power is beauty, she denies a woman (herself) the right to her own sovereignty' (19) (bracketing mine).

Both *The Swing of Desire* and *Fida*, therefore, exemplify, that the desire to be 'worshipped' as 'beautiful muse' only produces a false notion of power and freedom. Playing the 'hag bitch' may suffer the same predicament as well. But being identified as 'desiring' in place of the 'desirable', increases the potential towards liberation from the masculine 'fantasy' of control and possession. Manasa's efforts in liberating herself from the emotional and economic dependence through her dance, not merely, frustrate the masculine 'fantasy' but also subvert the hetero-normative game of desire. Hence freedom as the sovereign will and women's exclusive desires are in constant interplay with socio-cultural contexts when the Indian women playwrights and directors are considered.